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Review of *More than Chattel: Black Women and Slavery in the Americas*

Morgan Reddick

Georgia Southern University, Statesboro, Georgia

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More than Chattel: Black Women and Slavery in the Americas

Edited by David Barry Gaspar and Darlene Clark Hine. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996. ISBN-13: 978-0253210432

In the last fifty years, researchers have put a greater effort towards understanding African-American heritage and diaspora. Diaspora consists of the worldwide collection and dispersal of Africans, mostly due to the slave trade during colonial expansion. Before the 1970's, little research was done in regards to the day to day lives of plantation slaves in the Americas. *More Than Chattel* is a collection of essays assembled by various scholars in an effort to outline the experiences of slaves. More specifically, the book gives insight into the struggles and hardships faced by slave women in the United States, Brazil, and the Caribbean. "The contributors to this volume, focusing on the lives, situations, and experiences of slave and free black women, explore the diverse dimensions of slavery and the related forces that shaped slave society to show that one of the most decisive of these forces was gender, however it may have been constructed in particular societies or applied in particular situations" (ix). This volume outlines the key differences in the lives of slaves based on geography, gender, culture of their oppressors, and the social class of the slave in regards to their counterparts.

The book is divided into three sections, each outlining a different aspect of life for an African slave woman. The chapters contained within each section narrow the focus even deeper into the small aspects of slave life, while ultimately supporting the entire theme of the work. The first section of the book is called "Africa and the Americas," and contains only one chapter. This contribution written by Claire Robertson gives the reader a general outline of information, and what is to be expected throughout the rest of the book. Robertson is clear, concise, and thorough

in her delineation of the differential hardships experienced by African slave women so far away from their rightful homeland.

The second part of the book is titled “Life and Labor,” and this is the longest section containing eight chapters. The different chapters of this portion of the book focus on childbearing, plantation life in the United States, house slaves in Barbados, slavery in Brazil, and the remarkable and cunning ways that these women resisted oppression. For example, chapter five details how slave women came to dominate commerce in the market in Charleston, South Carolina, effectively bypassing the illegality of what they were doing. The will of these persecuted women to not only survive, but to also persevere is remarkable. They are the backbone of the African slave community, and the love for their children knew no boundaries. “Slave women’s image or images of themselves, more often than not, were overwhelmingly positive, even heroic” (170). Brenda E. Stevenson does a fantastic job in chapter nine of piecing together first-hand accounts of Virginia slave women to further support this point.

The final section of the book is titled “Slavery, Resistance, and Freedom,” and it contains six different chapters laden with the resistance efforts put forth by slave women in places such as Antigua, the French Caribbean, and Saint Domingue. Details are also given in regards to what life was like for these women after manumission. Many scholars have a difficult time following the stories of these women and where they came from because “slaves were almost always legally denied last names or names that would have associated them with their own families” (301). Many times, a great deal of effort was put into isolating individual slaves from any semblance of family or belonging. L. Virginia Gould closes the book with the final chapter effectively expounding this isolation, and the difficulty scholars face when attempting to get an accurate picture of life after manumission.

All of the contributions in this volume provide individual pieces of information that support the argument that African slave women often had the most difficult time navigating a life of slavery in the Americas and the Caribbean. Each scholar offers meaningful evidence, and uses their personal study and reflections to further back their argument. Overall, the book is an excellent resource to help better understand the lives of these women, and the hardships they face. It is an essential first step into a deeper comprehension of just how difficult it was to be an African woman, a slave, and in some cases, a mother. The only criticism I would give for this book is the redundancy of some of the chapters. I believe that some of the topics could have been condensed into a shorter explanation, allotting the extra space to more information on the abuse these women faced from their male counterparts. Taking everything into account, this book is a thought-provoking read with credible information and arguments supporting the general theme.

Morgan Reddick

Georgia Southern University

About the author

Morgan Reddick studies history and foreign language at the Armstrong campus of Georgia Southern University, located in Savannah, GA. Currently set to graduate in May 2021, Morgan plans to continue on with her education, and achieve her master's in history at the University of Kent in England.